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JEN TURANO



To
SPARK
A
MATCH

THE MATCHMAKERS | BOOK 2

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For Rachel Kortmeyer.
Thanks for the years of girl talk, listening to far too many
mediocre bands to count, and being an all-around
fabulous friend! I look forward
to the adventures ahead of us.
Love you!
Jen

One



HUDSON RIVER VALLEY
LATE OCTOBER 1888

If strolling through the drawing room with the hem of her gown trapped in the folds of her bustle, giving the two hundred upper-drawer society members attending Mrs. Ogden Nelson's intimate dinner party an unfettered view of her drawers, was a precursor of things to come during the approaching New York Season, then Miss Adelaide Duveen was now of the belief she should abandon her quest—or rather, her mother's quest—of acquiring one of those oh-so-coveted society matches and simply embrace her spinster state for the rest of her days.

Doing so would undoubtedly save her the bother of additional mortifying moments, which were inevitable if she kept pursuing what seemed to be a futile attempt to find a gentleman who was willing to overlook what society saw as numerous flaws and court her.

“Honestly, darling,” Phyllis Duveen, Adelaide's mother, said, bustling up to join her as Adelaide backed out of a charming parlor that, unfortunately, contained a gathering of young ladies in it. “Any thoughts on how this latest catastrophe occurred? I

mean, it's not every day—or any day, for that matter—that a lady strolls about in such a questionable state of dishabille.”

“What thoughts could I possibly have about my recent fiasco?” Adelaide returned as she continued down the hallway, pausing in front of a portrait of a terrifying older gentleman with muttonchop whiskers who was undeniably a long-deceased relative of Mrs. Nelson, given the distinct resemblance the gentleman bore to their hostess. “It’s not as if I intended on giving everyone a glimpse of my undergarments.”

“Your fiascos are never intentional,” Phyllis murmured before she took hold of Adelaide’s hand. “Nevertheless, I must say this is one of your most unusual mishaps to date. I truly have no idea how such a circumstance could have transpired.”

“I imagine my latest calamity was a result of my attempting to readjust this monstrosity of a bustle. I was unaware that my hem got stuck in the dastardly contraption, which then resulted with me making a complete ninny of myself after I returned from the retiring room.”

Phyllis frowned. “Why were you readjusting your bustle? I gave your lady’s maid specific instructions to secure it with additional ties so you wouldn’t have to fuss with it this evening.”

“It wasn’t Marta’s fault. It was the bustle’s fault for shifting, or perhaps Mr. Hayworth is to blame since he’s the one who insisted his gown needed such a massive bustle to begin with. Why he designed such a gown for me is somewhat puzzling, though, because bustles are decreasing in size this year.” Adelaide gave her skirt a twitch. “The thought did cross my mind that you haven’t abandoned that nonsense about making me look more voluptuous through designs that add inches to what even I know is a boyish figure. I then discarded that notion because we supposedly came to an understanding about unusual design ploys after I attended that ball in Newport dressed like a peculiar version of a cake, what with all the frills and lace Mr. Hayworth added to that particular abomination.”

“I may have forgotten to mention the change in strategy to Mr. Hayworth, probably because he was so enthusiastic about having you try out a new type of bustle—one he invented himself,” Phyllis admitted. “From what I understand, he’s included coiled springs between the wires, which he’s hoping will allow you to sit with greater ease.”

“My bustle is spring-concocted?”

“Apparently, but after your latest incident, I’m going to suggest you don’t attempt to sit down often because, now that I consider the matter, coiled springs may be a certain recipe for disaster.”

Adelaide glanced over her shoulder to the bustle in question. “I certainly would have abandoned this gown for a less problematic one if I’d known about the coils.”

“Which would have been a shame because the blush hue of your gown does wonders for bringing out the color in your eyes.”

“My eyes are brown. It’s difficult to bring out any other color except brown, no matter what hue my gown might be.”

“An excellent point. Perhaps I should have said the blush is in direct contrast to your dark hair, which lends you an air of, ah, mystery.”

Adelaide choked back a laugh. “Simply because my hair is black does not mean I’m mysterious.”

“Sophia Campanini has black hair, and she’s considered very enigmatic indeed.”

“Sophia Campanini is a premier opera singer, something I’m most assuredly not. Everyone considers opera singers mysterious. However, it’s difficult to say whether Sophia’s hair is actually black. She’s known to frequently wear wigs. Case in point, a few weeks ago I spotted her strolling along the Ladies’ Mile wearing a platinum wig that was drawing everyone’s attention.”

Phyllis’s eyes began to gleam. “Ooh . . . platinum.”

“Do not even consider hying yourself off to the nearest wig-maker and procuring platinum locks for me.”

“But that might be exactly what’s needed to give you that cloak of mystery that seems to be eluding you.”

“Mystery eludes me because I’m simply not mysterious.”

“That could very well change if we attach a noteworthy wig to your head.”

Adelaide arched a brow. “Do you honestly believe, what with how I cannot manage to keep a bustle in place, that I’d somehow be capable of keeping a wig securely fashioned to my head?”

“Another excellent point, which is why it’s fortunate Sophia Campanini is scheduled to perform after the midnight supper. I’ll simply have Mrs. Nelson introduce me to the famed opera singer, who I believe has already arrived, given all the oohs and aahs I heard before your unfortunate mishap.”

“I highly doubt Sophia Campanini will be keen to speak with the mother of the lady responsible for detracting attention away from what she undoubtedly was expecting to be a grand entrance. Even if people were oohing and aahing over her appearance, I’m sure that was cut short after everyone spotted me in all my unmentionable glory.”

Phyllis gave a bit of a shudder. “Perhaps it would be best if I simply seek out the advice of my hair stylist. I imagine she’s well versed in the language of wigs.”

“Or you could put this less-than-amusing idea of yours aside and forget about wigs altogether.”

“That’s some wishful thinking on your part, because I’m now of the opinion that having you sport an unusual hair color is exactly what’s needed to set you apart from the crowd.”

“I believe my propensity for mishaps, my love of books, my lack of proficiency with most feminine arts, my enormous collection of cats, and my questionable fashion sense already sets me worlds apart from the crowd—and not in a favorable manner.”

“I’m the one responsible for your fashion choices.”

Adelaide gave her mother’s arm a pat. “And you’ve been very diligent with attempting to discover what fashions suit me, even if we’ve yet to land on a style that shows me to any sort of advantage. Nevertheless, with that said, I’m putting my foot down about the wig. The last thing you’ll want to see is me losing a wig in my soup during the first course of a formal dinner.”

“I bet a little touch of glue would prevent that from happening.”

“We are not *gluing* anything to my head. Besides, no one will suddenly conclude that I’m an intriguing lady merely because my hair is an unusual color. If you’ve neglected to remember, I’m twenty-three years old and have been out in society for five Seasons, both winter and summer. It would be next to impossible to convince anyone I’m anything other than peculiar. Wandering around with a wig on my head will only succeed in increasing the notion society already holds about me.”

Phyllis seemed to deflate on the spot. “Oh, very well, no wig. But we’ll need to think of something to distract everyone from this latest incident. I don’t imagine anyone is going to easily forget the sight of your drawers, what with how they seemed to be sporting some manner of embroidered animals with pointy ears on them.”

“They’re cats,” Adelaide said. “Although they don’t resemble cats—more along the lines of bats, but that’s because Mrs. Bainswright, the woman who made the undergarments for me, has yet to master the art of embroidery, probably because I’ve been the one teaching her. I’m not what anyone would call proficient with needlepoint.”

“I’m not acquainted with a Mrs. Bainswright.”

“Maude and her husband, Alfonso, own Bainswright Books on Blecker Street.”

“I’ve never heard of that bookstore,” Phyllis said before she frowned. “But since Mrs. Bainswright took the time to embroider

such an unusual gift for you, it seems as if you spend particular time in this mysterious shop, something I was unaware of.”

“There’s no need for you to start looking all suspicious,” Adelaide said. “I’ve not been hiding anything from anyone, except that Bainswright Books is my favorite bookstore. I’ve only done that, though, because it’s a shop society rarely frequents. If word got out that, in addition to being a treasure trove of rare tomes, Mr. Bainswright also stocks some of the latest romance and dime novels, Bainswright Books would soon see an influx of the social set and would no longer be the refuge I enjoy away from the Four Hundred.”

“Aren’t you depriving Mr. Bainswright of potential well-heeled customers by keeping the delights of this shop to yourself?”

“The Bainswrights aren’t particularly enthusiastic to serve members of the upper crust, especially the ladies, no matter if they’re well-heeled or not. Society ladies expect to be catered to, and Mr. Bainswright is not exactly what I’d call a catering-to sort. The only reason he keeps an impressive selection of dime novels for sale, as well as copies of papers such as ‘The Fireside Companion,’ is because Mrs. Bainswright devours such riveting reads like candy. Mr. Bainswright, on the other hand, would be content to avoid readers who enjoy what he calls ‘fluff pieces,’ because he prefers to devote his time to his rare book section, which is where his profitability lies.”

“How does he make a profit from rare books if he doesn’t cater to the society set?”

“Gentlemen who are interested in acquiring rare books rarely go through the bother of tracking them down on their own. They hire agents for that. Those are the men Mr. Bainswright deals with.”

“But where does Mr. Bainswright acquire rare books from?”

“He has a variety of sources—men who purchase items from estates as well as people who need funds and dust off old tomes

and novels they won't miss. The latter does concern me, since some of those sellers are a rather shifty lot."

"You spend time in a bookstore that caters to shifty sorts?"

"It's an unavoidable hazard, given that most bookshops dealing in rare books attract dubious characters."

"With the abysmal state of your luck, darling, I'm going to encourage you to avoid this bookstore, lest you find yourself tangling with those questionable characters."

Adelaide waved that aside. "Mr. Bainswright keeps a shotgun at the ready, one Mrs. Bainswright has assured me he knows how to use." She smoothed a wrinkle from her sleeve. "But speaking of Mrs. Bainswright, she's bound to be disappointed about my latest catastrophe. She was convinced her gift was going to bring me some much-needed luck in the romance department, because she read a plot line that revolved around unusual unmentionables in one of her favorite dime novels. I'm afraid she was off the mark about the luck business, because I'm sure no gentleman will go out of his way to seek me out tonight."

"Gentlemen would have a difficult time doing that when it's obvious you're currently in search of a quiet room to hide out in for the remainder of the ball." Phyllis stepped closer to Adelaide. "You must realize there's no need for you to bury yourself away simply because you've once again suffered an embarrassing episode. Frankly, I'm convinced we can use this latest debacle to secure you every dance being offered tonight."

"The last thing I want is to secure sympathy dances from gentlemen I know you're going to browbeat into taking to the floor with me."

"I have no idea why you believe I stoop to browbeating," Phyllis said, with a far too innocent bat of her lashes.

It was impossible for Adelaide to resist a snort. "You've made a habit of badgering gentlemen ever since I made my debut, which means browbeating is inevitable where you're concerned.

If you haven't noticed, gentlemen have begun fleeing from you the moment you begin breezing your way across a ballroom. They know your particular attention presages another episode where you'll wield guilt like a weapon to have them fill up my woefully lacking-in-names dance card."

"I've never seen a gentleman flee from me."

"Of course you have, which is exactly why you've recently begun prevailing upon your friends to pester gentlemen on your behalf, something I'm now going to insist comes to an immediate cessation."

Phyllis smiled rather weakly. "An immediate cessation may not be possible because Mrs. Oliver Wetmore already told me she's secured Mr. Barton Delafield's agreement to partner with you for the second dance of the evening. He's apparently partnering Miss Thelma Cutting for the first waltz, although he mentioned to Mrs. Wetmore that if he'd not requested Miss Cutting's hand for that dance, he would have been more than amiable to taking to the floor with you for the waltz, something I took as very encouraging indeed."

"If Mr. Delafield truly wanted to dance with me, he'd have asked to add his name to my dance card when I ran across him in the receiving line. However, since he didn't broach the topic of dancing then, I'm certain he won't suffer any lasting ill effects when he realizes I've disappeared during a dance he only grudgingly agreed to in the first place."

"Mr. Delafield wouldn't need to suffer at all if you'd set aside your mortification and rejoin the festivities."

"I'm looking at my most recent calamity not as an incident where I need to hide myself away because of embarrassment but as a convenient excuse to indulge in something I genuinely enjoy—reading. I'm in the middle of a book about mummies, which I'm sure I'll find more satisfying than dreading the approach of gentlemen who've been pressed into requesting the honor of dancing with me, which they never feel is an honor."

“I’m certain many of the gentlemen who’ve needed a touch of convincing to waltz you about a room find themselves completely charmed with your company after a dance is completed.”

“My *charm* is exactly why those gentlemen never ask for a second dance in any given evening.”

Phyllis released a sigh. “I’m sure they’d be only too happy to do so if you allowed them to know you’d enjoy a second dance.”

“I discontinued doing that during my first Season out after I mentioned to Mr. Harold Seward that I enjoyed dancing the Star Quadrille, which was scheduled after dinner that evening.” Adelaide gave a sad shake of her head. “The moment I was done speaking, Mr. Seward began hemming and hawing about how he was committed to other ladies for the remainder of the ball. He couldn’t get away from me fast enough, and to this day, he’s never invited me to dance with him again.”

Phyllis’s lips thinned. “It was not well done of Harold to treat you so shoddily, especially during your first Season out.”

“Harold Seward did me a favor because he showed me, as nothing else could, that I was never going to be considered a diamond of the first water, nor considered any type of catch, except for the most desperate of fortune-hunters, whom I’ve sufficiently dissuaded over the years by using that charm you just mentioned. But enough about my lack of success within society. It doesn’t bother me, which means it shouldn’t bother you either.”

“I only want to see you happy.”

“I *am* happy, just not the particular type of happy you want me to be. However, because I know you’re going to fret about me removing myself from the festivities, know that I won’t read for the entirety of Mrs. Nelson’s dinner party. Rest assured, you’ll see me make an appearance for the midnight supper. I’m bound to be ravenous by then, and I certainly won’t want to linger in that regrettable state.”

Phyllis began fiddling with the buttons on one of her silk

evening gloves. “I suppose that’s somewhat reassuring, but you must at least allow me to convince Mrs. Nelson to rearrange your seating at dinner. She has you sitting between Mr. Vernon Clarkson and Mr. Leopold Pendleton. Those two gentlemen are not suitable dinner partners because they’re positively ancient.”

“*Au contraire*. I enjoy Mr. Clarkson’s and Mr. Pendleton’s company. They’re amusing and adore regaling me with stories about the adventures they experienced in their youth.”

“It would be more helpful if you’d be amused by the exploits of a younger gentleman, one who is currently experiencing those escapades instead of having done them fifty years ago.”

“If only there were any young, adventurous gentlemen who longed to sit beside me at dinner parties.”

“We’ll never discover the answer to that if you refuse to allow me to meddle with seating assignments.”

“No meddling, and with that out of the way, I’m off to read my book. You may at least take comfort in knowing that reading should not allow me to experience any additional shocking incidents this evening.”

“That’s small comfort, especially when the topic of your unmentionables is going to be fodder for wagging tongues for the foreseeable future.” Phyllis brushed a piece of lint from Adelaide’s gown. “Half the guests in attendance tonight will be repairing to the city soon, whispering behind gloved hands about your latest incident.”

“You could take some comfort in the fact that Cousin Charles saved me earlier from plunging into the backyard fountain,” Adelaide said. “Society would have been even more aflutter if I’d suffered two catastrophes in one evening.”

“You never mentioned almost falling into a fountain.”

Adelaide scratched her nose. “I didn’t see the point because Charles saved me from a drenching, although . . . if he hadn’t saved me, that might have been a less embarrassing incident

to suffer through since I would have been left sopping wet, which would have given me the perfect excuse to return home early.”

“That still would have left tongues wagging, but why were you and Charles in the back courtyard to begin with? His mother, your dear aunt Petunia, is determined to see him wed in the next year. He’ll hardly be successful with that if he takes to lurking out of sight during society events.”

“Charles is making himself scarce because Miss Jennie Gibson is in attendance tonight. Aunt Petunia is apparently of the belief Jennie would be the perfect match for him.”

“And I’m in full agreement with that because Jennie Gibson is completely darling and is well on her way to being declared an Incomparable in the coming Season.”

“And that right there is why Charles is hesitant to even approach the lady. Incomparables have made it a habit to give him a wide berth, which is why he’ll continue skulking by the fountain unless Aunt Petunia manages to track him down.”

“You know she’ll ask me if I’ve seen him.”

“But since you haven’t seen him—merely heard me mention where he is—you can have a clear conscience telling your sister that you haven’t taken note of him all evening.” Adelaide began moving down the hallway, sticking her head into a room that, unfortunately, had three gentlemen gathered by a far window, their heads bent together and looking quite as if they were discussing matters of business.

“Perhaps you should suggest to Charles that he consider hiring a matchmaker, as so many gentlemen did over the Newport Season,” Phyllis said after Adelaide backed her way out of the room and began wandering down the hallway again.

Adelaide slowed to a stop, this time underneath a portrait of a well-dressed lady with a pampered poodle sitting on a chaise beside her. “There’s no point in doing that because Gwendolyn, the only matchmaker Charles finds remotely approachable, has

decided to set aside any future matchmaking endeavors and embrace her life as the new Mrs. Walter Townsend.”

“Which is regrettable, given the tremendous success Gwendolyn enjoyed during the summer.” Phyllis fiddled with the clasp of the diamond bracelet encircling her wrist. “I’m still holding out hope that she’ll realize she’s destined to make one last match before she hangs up her matchmaking gloves for good.”

Adelaide laughed. “I’ll give you this—you are resolute in your determination to see me settled. Nevertheless, if you’re hoping that last match would revolve around me, know that Gwendolyn offered numerous times to help me out in the gentleman department. I told her I couldn’t possibly accept her assistance.”

“Why in heaven’s name would you have refused what you should have seen as a godsent opportunity?”

“I highly doubt God spends His time worrying about sending me a matchmaker simply because I’m not a beacon for marriage-minded gentlemen. Besides, even though Gwendolyn proved to be beyond competent with securing matches, I’m not your typical society lady. I come with far too much baggage. It could’ve strained the friendship Gwendolyn and I developed if she’d taken me on and discovered I’m a hopeless case.”

“You’re not a hopeless case.”

“You’re my mother, so you’re required to say that, but I’m a realist. In fact, after the troubling event that occurred earlier, I’m beginning to consider abandoning the marriage mart altogether and simply accepting my fate as a confirmed spinster. My time in the city will be far less stressful as well as less mortifying for everyone involved.”

Phyllis blinked. “There’s no need to be hasty. Why, showing everyone your unmentionables wasn’t even that noteworthy. I imagine everyone has already forgotten about it.”

“You just said tongues would be wagging for the foreseeable future.”

“Not if we nip this situation in the bud.” Phyllis lifted her chin. “I say we return to the ballroom and proceed as if nothing happened.”

“And *I* say, given that I almost fell into a fountain and then experienced a bustle mishap, we should err on the side of caution and keep me well removed from everyone for an hour or so.”

“Oddly enough, that makes a certain amount of sense.” Phyllis settled a stern eye on Adelaide. “I will, however, expect you at dinner.”

“I told you, I’ll be ravenous by then, and you know I’m not one to ever pass up a ten-course meal.”

“I’m not sure it’s a good thing you’re more excited about a meal over enjoying the company of the guests here this evening,” Phyllis grumbled before she gave Adelaide a quick peck on the cheek, then turned and glided away.

Anxious to get down to some serious reading, Adelaide strode into motion, slowing when she caught sight of a door that was cracked open at the very end of the hallway. Making a beeline for it, she gave it a tentative push, wincing when it creaked. Her wince turned into a grin a second later, though, when she stepped into the room and discovered it was a well-appointed library, and better yet, devoid of people.

“Much better,” she said as she spotted a comfy-looking fainting couch and hurried over to it. After perching on the very edge of it—done so because her bustle wouldn’t allow her to do anything *but* perch—she opened the large reticule that certainly didn’t favor her gown and riffled through the contents, pulling out her copy of *My Winter on the Nile: Among the Mummies and Moslems* by a Mr. Charles Dudley Warner. She flipped to the page she’d marked with a ribbon, then stilled when, from out of the corner of her eye, she noticed the heavy damask drapes moving ever so slightly.

Rising to her feet, she moved to shut a window that a servant had evidently forgotten to close, not wanting Mrs. Nelson’s

drapes to become ruined by the storm everyone was saying would hit by midnight. She came to a rapid stop, though, when a pair of shoes captured her attention, ones that most assuredly belonged to the man she just realized was lurking behind the drapes—a man who was even now beginning to step out from the folds of expensive damask, his features cloaked in the shadows the wall sconces were unable to banish.

It took all of two seconds to fling her book in the direction of a gentleman who was obviously up to some manner of she-nanigans before she opened her mouth to release a resounding scream.

Unfortunately, before she could get so much as a croak past her lips, the man grabbed hold of her arm and slipped his other hand over her mouth, stifling a scream that no one would now be able to hear.

